

Museums and Community: New Positions in Museum Education

One would agree the world is swiftly changing, sometimes at a rate that is challenging for us to comprehend. Traditionally museums have played a role in assisting us to understand these changes and the significance of the social, political and economic transformations that have historically taken place. More often than not museums have positioned themselves in this reflexive stance, packaging historical events into interpretive formats for viewer consumption.

Conversely what would happen if museums didn't follow this format and decided to utilize their knowledge base in a different way? What if museums were to be proactive and engage in the social, political and economic challenges that are transpiring today in their own communities? What impact would museums have on the lives of people beyond educating the public about history and being storehouses for material culture?

In the past five years there has been immense literature and debate that has attempted to address the role of the museum in relationship to community. What has emerged is a new museology that engages with multiple communities as way to include all members of society. The concept of the 'museum community' is complex and as the world is in a constant state of flux so are the communities in which museums serve.

Defining the 'museum community' is therefore very difficult, it can however be best understood through the realization that communities and sub-communities are dynamic. A pool of individuals within any locality will form into groups do to a variety of social influences, (migration, economics, and cultural change); some of these groups will become part of the museum community. The fact that only some

will be attracted by what the museum has to offer implies that other social groups are excluded from the museums.¹

Museums can no longer be measured by internal collections they need to be considered by the external benefits provided to individuals and communities.

Drawing on examples of the Museums of Malawi's educational mobile outreach programs this paper considers the links between community groups and museum practice, "be it through the activity within the established museum sector or examples of separate community initiatives that have drawn upon the techniques of and methods of the museum".² Three key areas will be discussed, first how public policy is included in the development of museum education practices, secondly the role of the museum in regards to the concept of the *development of character to development*. Thirdly, the consideration of how the museum represents community identity in a way that incorporates community cultural heritage and symbolizes the role of museums in supporting the arts in community development.

Public Policy Practices: Museums and Civic Culture

The formation of museums developed in juxtaposition with that of colonialism. There were predominately two waves of ethnographic collection periods 1849 - 1884 and 1890 – 1931. Although there were two other exceptions the Academy of Sciences of St.

¹ Watson, Sheila. Museums and Their Communities. Davis, Peter. *Museums, Identity, Community*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. P. 68

² MacDonald, Sharon. A Companion to Museum Studies. Croke, Elizabeth. *Museums and Community*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. USA. 2006. P.171

Petersburg 1836 and that of the Japan Museum in 1837. “By the late 19th century and early 20th century European and Asian museums reflected in their earlier collections or in their interpretations colonial interest of the metropolis”.³

Colonial encounters were often violent and ignited resistance that would later turn into independence movements and would be played out in the 21st century. As reflected in the institution of the museum, “civil rights activists raised important questions about whose culture, whose history, whose narrative was included in these institutions”.⁴

In the 21st century ownership and voice would become the most pressing issue projected towards museums. Some museums in confronting this challenge would take these ideas further and have become places that embrace these moral and ethical questions. They have positioned themselves as *museums of consciences* and prescribe to “encouraging visitors to believe that their decisions can have an impact in shaping the places where they live. They can make a difference if they choose”.⁵

From the early modern period, museums have been places in which citizens – have met conversed, been instructed, or otherwise engaged in rituals through which their rights as

³ MacDonald, Sharon. A Companion to Museum Studies. Shelton, Anthony Alan. *Museums and Anthropologies Practices and Narratives*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. USA. 2006. P. 65.

⁴ Lord, Barry. The Manual of Museum Learning. Crew, Spencer,R. *Involving the Community: The Museum as Forum for Dialogue and Learning*. Altamira Press, 2007. P.109

⁵ Lord, Barry. The Manual of Museum Learning. Crew, Spencer,R. *Involving the Community: The Museum as Forum for Dialogue and Learning*. Altamira Press, 2007. P.121

citizens have been enacted.⁶ Today heritage includes, roots identity, a sense of place and belonging. Representations of these ideals are articulated in an array of strategic goals, some economic, and some more as a sense of identity. A leading museum of consciences is the Museums of Malawi.

The Museums of Malawi is a government department of the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Culture and administers the public museums in the country. Founded in 1957, the name is collective, and represents the four government museums in Malawi. The Museums of Malawi department headquarters are located in Blantyre, which also houses the state's ethnology and natural history collections. The museums educate Malawians and their visitors through permanent exhibitions in Blantyre, Namaka, Mangochi, and Mzuzu. Their mission is to *preserve the natural and cultural heritage of Malawi*. However, the Education Coordinator, Michael Gondwe and the Education Officer, Aaron Maluwa have been instrumental in expanding this mission to include "*the collection, preservation, and study of the natural and cultural heritage to all Malawians in response to their contemporary demands.*"⁷

The government of Malawi has formed a national mandate to meet the objectives of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals for 2015 (MDG), which include; ending

⁶ MacDonald, Sharon. A Companion to Museum Studies. Bennet, Tony. *Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. USA. 2006. P.262

⁷ Thomson, Nicole. Culture Connection. *Day at the Museum*. Museums of Malawi, Malawi, 2005.

poverty and hunger, universal education, gender equality, child health, maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, environmental stability, global partnership.

Dr. Bingu wa Mutharilka President of the Republic of Malawi has expanded upon these goals by developing the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS), as a home grown overarching national policy that establishes *Priorities within Priorities*. The MGDS goals include:

- Agricultural development
- Food security
- Irrigation and water development
- Transportation and communication infrastructure development
- Energy and power
- Integrated rural development and management
- Management of HIV and AIDS
- Fight against malaria
- Access to portable water
- Universal primary education
- Maternal and child mortality

The combined goals of the United Nations MDG and the Republic of Malawi's MGDS creates a hopeful climate in present day Malawi's social political landscape. The people

of Malawi share a common vision to eliminate poverty in the shortest period, by transforming the country from a predominately importing and consuming to a predominately manufacturing and exporting economy”.⁸

Michael Gondwe and Aaron Maluwa have taken an instrumental role in developing education programs in juxtaposition with the MDG and MGDS goals. Most recently developing and implementing programs on malaria prevention, HIV/AIDS prevention, gender equality and the expressive arts for development and food security.

Development of Character to Development

Furthermore, the museum educator’s vision of Malawi’s development not only includes the MDG and the MGDS goals they have expanded this vision to include what they term *development of character to development*. This is a two-strand concept based upon both preserving and developing indigenous Malawian cultures.

Currently there is no government policy in place, which addresses the development of character as a way of preserving indigenous culture and also as a way to promote development within the country because it is commonly thought that by preserving the character of the indigenous people is considered to be preserving primitive culture and that is considered to be non-developmental.⁹

⁸ Mutharilka, Bingu wa. *Sixty-Second Session of the United Nations General Assembly*, New York, USA. September 25, 2007.

<http://www.un.int/wcm/webdav/site/malawi/shared/documents/Malawi%20and%20the%20Millennium%20Development%20Goals.doc>.

⁹ Gondwe, Michael, Museums of Malawi. Interview, May 25, 2009.

Mr. Gondwe and Mr. Maluwa are committed to incorporating indigenous cultural practices into their programming and believe that Malawi needs to look at *character for development* in three ways.

- As a way to change peoples mind set in their beliefs and cultural practices which enhance the spread of disease such HIV/AIDS
- Implement traditional media to spread messages
- Encourage the expressive arts as a way to combat poverty

The second strand of this concept of *development of character to development* is recognizing traditional knowledge's. For example, introducing alternatives to traditional food production. Traditionally maize has been the preferred crop since the 1800's but often this crop fails during drought years. Where as the relatively unknown casaba melons do well during droughts and are nutritious. People already know how to grow food and by educating people to alternate food crops this builds upon established traditional knowledge. This refinement of knowledge then in turn creates sustainability and food security.

The museum educators have an understanding that the conservation of culture depends on the sustainability of communities. Eighty percent of Malawi's populations live in rural communities are not educated and live in poverty. As a way to service these communities Mr. Gondwe and Mr. Maluwa developed Mobile Museum Outreach education programs.

Representing Culture: Community Identity

The notion that the museum is a uniquely modern western conception has become firmly rooted in western methodology. However, this has been one of the longstanding myths of the 20th and 21st centuries. In many societies there have been long standing traditions whereupon a custodian would be given the responsibility for collecting, caring and preserving highly regarded cultural objects. It has been a western assumption that western museums have the knowledge to safe guard objects of material cultural. “The removal of objects, especially spiritual objects contribute to the loss of cultural practices”¹⁰ rather than preserving culture.

The Mobile Museum Outreach programs recognize that the Malawian people are from an oral culture and this oral culture can be employed as a springboard to literacy through traditional ceremonies, dances, songs and participatory education lessons delivered in their own cultural language. This approach provides a means of expression to teach about HIV/AIDS prevention, malaria prevention, expressive arts, gender equality and food security. A prime example of traditional practices incorporated into education programs is the inclusion of the Gule Wamkulu (The Big Dance). The Chewa-speaking peoples living in Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi have practiced the Gule Wamkulu predating the migration of the Chewa people of southeastern Africa. Similar masquerade dances

¹⁰ MacDonald, Sharon. A Companion to Museum Studies. Kreeps, Christina. *Non-Western Models of Museums and Curation and Heritage Conservation*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. USA. 2006. P.457

occur “elsewhere in Africa such as the Nkann of the Bushlong, the Poro of the Mende, the Makishi of the Luvale, and the Inyago and Midimu of the Makonde and Makua”.¹¹

The Chewa culture is a matrilineal cultural group who determine their descent and kinship through women.

It is one symbol of their cultural heritage that has kept the Chewa unified and at peace with one another in the face of both colonial and post-colonial upheavals such as intertribal wars, slavery, oppression and hazards posed by modern, rapid social change. In terms of their population, the Chewa number about five million, with the majority living in Malawi, while their king, the Kalonga Gawa Undi, lives in Zambia.¹²

The Gule Wamkulu is considered to be the custodian of the oral tradition and culture of Chewa society. The dances first began by depicting the origins of life and death. The myth begins by telling of how the first rains fell from the sky and brought with them human beings, animals, fish and all natural things. At that time, God and the spirits also lived on the earth. There was prosperity, peace and harmony among all created beings. However, as time past mans curiosity and ambition began to grow. Man wanted to equal God’s wisdom and intelligence, so he challenged God’s presence. God became so annoyed with this assertion that he set the grasslands on fire and destroyed all of nature. God had gathered his spirits around him and choose some to accompany him to the great village in the sky. He left the rest of the spirits to remain on earth to become creatures that would harm and cause mystical death to humans. What followed was a time of great hardship, famine, disease, suffering and death. In an effort to “atone for their sins the masks were created to portray the human, animal and natural life forces and danced in an

¹¹ Mtonga, Mapopa. Museum International, *Gule Wamkulu as a Multi-state Enterprise*, Unesco, Blackwell Publishing, USA. 2006. P.59

¹² Mtonga, Mapopa. Museum International, *Gule Wamkulu as a Multi-state Enterprise*, Unesco, Blackwell Publishing, USA. 2006.P71

effort to restore friendship and harmony that once existed”.¹³ This dance is called the *Chauta* or the great prayer to God was created.

The Gule Wamkulu practitioners have incorporated huge puppets representing sacred animals such as, the elephant, antelope, and crocodile to represent the creation story. The animal puppets appear at night to create mystery and fear in their performances. A secondary group of animals, the dog, baboon, hyena, lion, tortoise and the hare, are regarded as the friends of human beings.

Over time many dances have been created and performed. Usually there are human representations in the dances predominately symbolizing sociological types such as the, “*Chazunda, the Wise Old Man*, who is full of knowledge and wisdom”.¹⁴ As well the dances depict the social and political structure of the Chewa culture, whereupon parody and satire are utilized as instruments of social control. For example, the Gule Wamkulu is a male dominated group based in a matriarchal society, so often this disparity of gender power is represented in dances. The Wamkamwa (Talkative) dance represents a female spirit that is a chatterbox and often talks of nothing but nonsense. The parody is very amusing to the community audience.

Interestingly the dances of the Gule Wamkulu represent their current social political conditions such as, colonialism, Christianity and urban industrial life. In the 18th and 19th

¹³ Mtonga, Mapopa. Museum International, *Gule Wamkulu as a Multi-state Enterprise*, Unesco, Blackwell Publishing, USA. 2006.P. 60.

¹⁴ Mtonga, Mapopa. Museum International, *Gule Wamkulu as a Multi-state Enterprise*, Unesco, Blackwell Publishing, USA. 2006.P. 61

centuries Missionaries regarded the Gule Wamkulu societies as pagan worshipers and for a time the Gule Wamkulu went underground to resist this influence. As a reaction to this oppression they created masks and dances, which used parody and satire to ridicule the colonial establishment. During the post-independence era the Gule Wamkulu created new masks representing freedom fighters. In contemporary times masks have been created to represent HIV/AIDS and malaria prevention.

Although the Gule Wamkulu is considered a secret male society, today the practice is being demystified as women openly participate in the dances without negative consequences. The ever-changing faces of the Gule Wamkulu masks and dances reflect the continual transformational social political constructs that are occurring within their everyday culture. The Gule Wamkulu is a dynamic form of cultural expression and in 2005 UNESCO has deemed their dances as a *Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*.

The incorporation of the Gule Wamkulu dances in the mobile museum programs acknowledges the importance of traditional knowledge's and cultural practices, while at the same time discourages cultural practices that are not conducive to contemporary times.

This means of communication is successful because it brings communities together in a social context that people understand and relate to, which further fosters a sense of belonging and respectful recognition. The Museums of Malawi recognizes community

identity and incorporates community heritage further, by developing the relationship between the museum and the communities in which they serve.

Museums of Malawi Mobile Outreach Programs

HIV/AIDS Prevention Program

In May of 2009 the Museums of Malawi's Mobile Outreach program traveled to a region in northern Malawi by Lake Malawi to implement a program on HIV/AIDS to local schools in the Monkey Bay area. This local was chosen because the youth in the area had been identified as being at a higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS because of recent tourist trade development. Many tourist hotels have been built next to the villages that line Lake Malawi. Some of the tourists solicit local youth to have sex for small sums of money. Being that Malawi is the poorest country in Africa, with an unemployment rate of 90 %, this exposes vulnerable youth to being seduced into the sex trade. The Museums of Malawi's HIV/AIDS Prevention programs are based on the concept of abstinence.

The HIV/AIDS Prevention program is delivered in three parts:

Part One: Morning Session with grade seven and eight elementary school students.

Cultural Practices: Traditional cultural practices which spread HIV/AIDS such as, polygamy, wife inheritance, wife gifting, circumcision, traditional dances that encourage sexual impulses in youth, Hyena (Feci) are role played and discussed.

HIV/AIDS Testing: Students and teachers are invited to share their experiences of what happens when they have been tested for HIV/AIDS.

Stigma and Discrimination: The support mechanisms for family and community members are discussed such as, love and compassion, appropriate treatment, encouragement of the correct diet.

HIV/AIDS Testimony Video: A video illustrating people's experiences with having HIV/Aids is shown to students.

Conclusion: The concept of abstinence, staying in school and HIV /AIDS testing is reinforced.

Part Two: Afternoon session for adults.

The second part of the program is HIV/AIDS prevention for adult members of the local community. Sometimes six villages can be in attendance for this program. The same lessons are taught to the adults that were taught in the morning class. By doing so this supports the students learning to change cultural practices by educating the parents to the

risks that they themselves and their children are exposed to. This format reinforces the concepts learned and offers community members the opportunity for discussion with youth. The afternoon section is more open and is based upon faithfulness between a man and a woman. The program discusses sex education topics such as, touching, sexual positions and being seen with out clothes on, sex during pregnancy etc. The question and discussion period continues for a greater length of time than the morning program.

Part Three: The afternoon program concludes by bringing students, parents and community members together in a celebratory manner by including traditional dances by community groups and/or with the Gule Wamkulu. In this specific program the traditional dancers represent HIV/AIDS prevention in song and dance.

In conclusion, the HIV/AIDS Prevention program offers educational information and alternatives to community members that do not have access to this kind of information. The program dispels traditional practices that are based upon myths. Such as, men who are HIV positive believe that sex with a virgin can cure them. Another example is the women tester, where by parents in a village traditionally seek an older male to teach their 13-year old daughters about sex. Consequently, infected men transmit HIV to unsuspecting young women and the disease spreads. The museum programs teach villager the facts about HIV/AIDS and how it is transmitted. However, they must work carefully within the cultural traditions of local communities or their credibility may not overcome the myths.

Museum education from its earliest mission formations was based upon a prominence on social change. In the words of one of the earliest founders of museum education John Dewey; “Museum educators need to do more than challenge their visitors; they need to constantly challenge themselves, examine their practice, and reflect on the extent to which it matches – both in process and in content – the theory they espouse”.¹⁵

As museum educators we all have blind spots that hinder program delivery. Dealing with complex issues is always a messy business as the realities of the world are always in flux. We need to be in a constant state of reflection, critically evaluating our pedagogical ideas as Dewey suggests.

Malaria Prevention Program

The Malaria Prevention program is developed in partnership with local health care professionals, school district officials and community leaders. The target audience is primary school children, teachers, parents and other community members. What’s most unique and exciting about this program is Michael and Aaron’s incorporation of traditional and cultural practices in the delivery of the malaria prevention activities.

The primary aims of the program are:

- Sensitization about malaria signs and symptoms, treatment, and prevention methods.

¹⁵ Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education*. New York; G.P. Putman’s Son. 1944.

- Changed behavior in children and communities so that they can recognize malaria signs and symptoms, understand treatment options, and put into practice prevention methods.
- Distribution of Insecticide-Treated Nets (ITN).
- Establishment of anti-malaria clubs.
- Encouraging the close collaboration of stakeholders, such as the National Malaria Control Programme, Population Services International (PSI), hospitals, the District Health Offices (DHO), the District Education Offices (DEO), schools, and the Museums of Malawi, on malaria issues.

Malaria greatly impacts the economic growth and development of Malawi. The cost of health care, the number of sick days taken by employees, the loss of education to students due to illness, and the increased risk of mental and physical health, loss of tourism and international investment are all examples of why the Malawi government has made malaria prevention a top priority in the country.

One of the most cost effective forms of malaria prevention is the use of treated mosquito nets. The United Children's Fund (UNICEF) distributed 122,0000 insecticide treated mosquito nets to the most needy in rural villages. The Museums of Malawi's program builds upon these efforts by educating communities to understand the causes, signs, symptoms and treatments for malaria. Their program has been successfully implemented three times in the last four years. However, it has been directly funded by outside sources, as the Museums of Malawi's operating funds are \$50.00 a month. The distribution of

treated mosquito nets is limited compared to the resources of UNICEF, distribution is decided upon by a quiz that the students complete to show their understanding of the concepts taught during the program. The top students are chosen to receive the mosquito nets. Unfortunately this excludes any students who may have learning difficulties. As well, there may have been a higher achievement level if the quiz had been administered orally instead of by a written test. Written test scores may not be reflective of a student's knowledge gained during the program because Malawian culture is based upon an oral education. However, due to limited number of treated mosquito nets this was the fairest way the museums educators thought the nets could be distributed.

Expressive Arts and Development

The Expressive Arts program was first developed in 2007 in partnership with local and national government agencies to meet the United Nations Millennium Development Goals for 2015 (MDG) and the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS). The concept of the program is to encourage teachers to teach the expressive arts curriculum as a way to encourage self-employment and to combat poverty. As well, this program is a way for teachers to share their experiences as educators and to see how they can help the government with development.

The target audience is teachers.

The primary aims of the program are:

- United Nations Millennium Development Goals for 2015 (MDG)
- Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS).
- Encourage the teaching of the expressive arts

Questions to be considered during the session are:

- What is the role of Education?
- How can education address poverty?
- How can education move from abject poverty to development?

Informing teachers of community development goals and providing an understanding of the purpose of community in public policy such as, the MDG's and MGDS's was not enough to encourage them to teach the expressive arts at a grass roots level. Teachers' responded by stating that it was not a reasonable expectation for teachers' to teach all subjects and implement the expressive arts curriculum, when they are working under extremely difficult conditions such as, large class sizes (100 - 200 – 500 - 1000 students per teacher), no supplies, low wages, and poor living conditions. Often classrooms take place outside under a large tree's spreading branches, as they provide shade and rain protection. In the future the program will be developed to include a creative component such as, a teacher's workshop on dancing, weaving, or another expressive arts medium.

The Expressive Arts program challenged the teachers to consider the consequences of not teaching the expressive arts, and how the development of the country will be impacted.

Conclusion:

Even though Museum Studies in the 21st century focuses on people, identity, representation and social responsibility, most museum education programs still take place within the constructs of the museum. The goal of the museum educators of the Museums of Malawi's is to create the Mobile Outreach programs to reach the 80 % of the population who live in rural communities and who have no access to, or connection with the museum. They have developed these programs in line with the goals of international, national and local institutions and have built successful relationships with all stakeholders involved.

The integration of cultural representation within programming has expanded the education programs from being *object based* to that of being *living based*. Where upon indigenous people can relate and participate in the programs. The Museums of Malawi's Mobile Outreach programs go beyond teaching history but foster a sense of belonging through community cultural practices. The integration of cultural practices such as, dancing, story telling and so on gives real meaning to the words, *bringing history to life!* Most importantly the Museums of Malawi is a museum of the people, genuinely engaging with multiple communities as way to include all members of society.

We as museum educators need to look critically at how we are implementing our programs and consider if we are servicing the needs of *all* members of our society or just a select few who enter our doors. Perhaps we need to focus more on getting out into the field and connecting with our communities.

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